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ABSTRACT

This report describes the findings of two half-day focus group meetings that discussed experiences and concerns about the participation of students with disabilities in Minnesota's Basic Standards Exams. The focus groups included test coordinators, general classroom teachers, and special education teachers. The report discusses: (1) experiences during the Spring 1996 testing, including information on the level of participation by students with disabilities, how participation decisions were made, and provision accommodations; (2) suggestions for future test administration, including information on district decision making processes and determining levels of participation; (3) future district needs; including the need for information about the performance of students with disabilities on the tests separate from students in general education, more information about the tests, training and support from the state for both school personnel and parents, and other needs; and (4) district concerns, including general concerns about Basic Standards Tests, Basic Standards Test accommodations for written composition, resources for accommodations, focus on remedial efforts to pass the tests at the expense of other types of learning experiences, use of data, equity issues, and other concerns. (CR)

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Focus Group Input on Students with Disabilities and Minnesota's Basic Standards Tests

Minnesota Children

Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning

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STATE ASSESSMENT SERIES
Minnesota Report 3

Focus Group Input on Students with Disabilities and Minnesota's Basic Standards Tests

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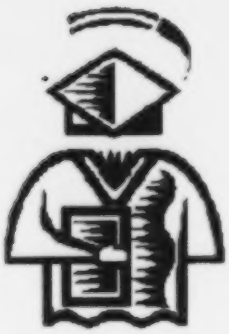

The Minnesota Assessment Project is a four-year, federally funded effort awarded to the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. The project's goal is to promote and evaluate the participation of students with limited English proficiency and students with disabilities in Minnesota's Graduation Standards. Specifically, the project will examine ways in which students with limited English and students with disabilities can participate in the Basic Standards Exams of reading, mathematics and written composition and in the performance-based assessments of the high standards in the Profile of Learning.

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Overview

It is a time of much change in Minnesota's educational system. Minnesota has joined numerous other states in the call for higher standards and for assessment and accountability systems that will help ensure that Minnesota's students are reaching those standards. In the spring of 1996, Minnesota students participated in the first administration of the Basic Standards Tests, one component of Minnesota's new educational accountability system. Although this administration of reading and mathematics (two of the three components of the Basic Standards Tests) was on a voluntary basis for districts, most school districts participated in the assessment.

Most districts indicated that more than 50% of their students with disabilities participated in the assessment.

Besides encouraging districts to participate in the 1996 testing cycle, the state of Minnesota also encouraged districts to include all students who would be eligible to participate. Surveys of some of the participating districts (see Minnesota Report 1) suggested that districts did, in fact, attempt to include students with disabilities in the assessments. Most districts indicated that more than 50% of their students with disabilities participated in the assessment. Districts also indicated that they provided assessment accommodations to students, even though in many cases, they did not yet have their guidelines about the use of accommodations developed. Districts indicated the need for several kinds of assistance from the state to develop and use these guidelines.

When the survey was developed, it was considered important to follow-up on the information obtained with it by inviting individuals from representative districts to participate in half-day focus groups to discuss experiences and concerns in greater depth. This report is a summary of those discussions.

Procedures

Two half-day focus group meetings were held to gather findings from the Spring 1996 testing, with a particular focus on students with disabilities. For the first half-day meeting, the testing coordinator, a

general classroom teacher, and a special education teacher from each of three metropolitan area school districts attended. For the second half-day meeting, the same set of personnel from each of four greater Minnesota districts attended. Participating in the focus group meetings were:

July 23rd Focus Group for Metropolitan Districts:

Anoka-Hennepin: Ruth Castle, Caroline Lappin, and Gayle Walkowiak

Minneapolis: William Earley, Judi Hanson, Bev Lillquist, and Katie White

St. Paul : Connie Fisk, Jan Manchester, Zhining Qin, and Michael Wirtz

July 24th Focus Group for Greater Minnesota Districts:

Minnesota River Valley Cooperative: Barb Bahson, Shelli Kriha, and Betsy Lasch

Mountain Lake: Joyce Bolte and Cynthia Celander

St. Cloud: Judy Germanson, Tom Prescott, and Karmin Schraw

Willmar: Bill Busta, Amy Grussing, and Marv Lucas

These individuals participated in the focus group meetings with interest, enthusiasm, and concern about students with disabilities during Minnesota's educational reform efforts. The Minnesota Assessment Project is indebted to them for their enthusiastic participation in these focus group meetings.

For both of the meetings, the discussion followed an agenda that outlined the questions to be covered. To summarize these discussions,

this report has been organized into four general sections: (1) experiences during the Spring 1996 testing; (2) suggestions for future test administrations; (3) future district needs; and (4) district concerns.

I. Experiences During Spring 1996 Testing

A. Levels of Participation by Students with Disabilities

In both the metropolitan and greater Minnesota districts, most students with disabilities (closer to 100% than 50%) participated in testing. Students who were exempted included those with the most severe disabilities and in some parts of greater Minnesota, those for whom their IEP goals did not reflect areas of instruction included on the tests. In both the metropolitan and greater Minnesota districts, the consensus among districts appeared to be that as many students as possible participated since this was a voluntary year of testing.

B. How Participation Decisions Were Made

Participation decisions were made in several different ways across the state. For example, one metropolitan district reported that principals mandated full student participation in their buildings. A representative from greater Minnesota stated that she didn't think there was any choice about whether or not to include students with disabilities; therefore, they tested everyone except for three children with severe disabilities. Several districts in both the metropolitan area and greater Minnesota had previously administered either pilot state tests or other forms of standards tests and had adopted the philosophy of including as many students with disabilities as possible. One metropolitan district reported that they provided guidelines for schools regarding accommodations, adaptations, and exemptions for students with disabilities. Two of the metropolitan districts stated that because of the time frame, there was not enough time for district staff to meet with individual schools to plan. Participants from one greater Minnesota district stated that they had been

unsure about how to test students with disabilities (e.g., could students be tested in the resource room?).

C. Providing Accommodations

With respect to accommodations and modifications during the Spring 1996 testing cycle, several metropolitan districts reported that they did not have adequate planning time to provide all the desirable accommodations and modifications. Other districts, both from greater Minnesota and the metropolitan area, reported that they did make some accommodations and modifications (e.g., extended time, calculators, and alternative settings such as testing in the resource room).

II. Suggestions for Future Test Administrations

A. District Decision Making Process

When asked whether districts would include all students with disabilities again in the upcoming year, several greater Minnesota districts stated that they would make more careful decisions about this issue. For example, one district stated that no students in day treatment had passed the test, and they felt that many of the students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) had just "filled in the blanks." They stated that in the upcoming testing cycle they would probably exempt some students and would also look more closely at accommodations and modifications.

Another participant from a metropolitan district discussed the need for schools to begin talking about testing in September, in order to allow adequate planning time. However, one significant problem is that by February, up to half of those students will have left the school or district.

B. *Determining Levels of Participation: Pass-State, Pass-Individual, and Exempt Status*

Levels of participation were discussed in the context of incentives and disincentives for participation. Participants from both greater Minnesota and the metropolitan districts had a number of questions and concerns about the implications of choosing one level over another.

Regarding the level at which students with disabilities should begin testing, most participants reported that they would not want students to begin at the "Exempt" or "Pass-Individual" levels. Most of the representatives from greater Minnesota stated that they would they would aim for the "Pass-State" level for most students with disabilities, and then change their expectations as needed. Similarly, metropolitan representatives expressed the belief that most students should try at the "Pass-State" level because it can provide valuable baseline data and information for developing curricula.

Most participants reported that they would not want students to begin at the "Exempt" or "Pass-Individual" levels.

Most participants felt that the "Pass-Individual" and "Exempt" options should be considered secondary choices, or ones used for students with the most severe disabilities. One metropolitan district reported that they work on curriculum until January of 12th grade, then consider the "Pass-Individual" or "Exempt" levels. This particular district, as well as one of the greater Minnesota cooperative districts, has developed its own remediation planning forms and practices as a way to inform curriculum and provide remedial help for students (with and without disabilities) who do not initially reach the "Pass-State" criterion. Another metropolitan district representative commented that knowing about the option of later exemption would probably cause teachers to encourage students with disabilities to participate. Many of the greater Minnesota participants believe that most parents would be open to the idea of their child(ren) attempting to pass at the "State" level. A participant from one of the metropolitan districts that has been administering graduation tests for several years, reported that it is cause for celebration by families when their child passes at the level expected of students in general education.

Although the majority of representatives from both metropolitan and greater Minnesota districts agreed with encouraging students to attempt the tests at "Pass-State" levels, there was not total agreement with this position. When considering actual practice, some participants believed that districts might find reasons to encourage students to pass at either the "Pass-State" or "Pass-Individual" levels. One metropolitan district participant asserted that some IEP teams may want to know whether classroom instruction was working; therefore, they would likely have the student take the test at the "Pass-State" level. Others may choose the "Pass-Individual" level if they view it as easier or more fair for the student. While supporting the idea of students attempting at the "Pass-State" level, a representative from greater Minnesota also endorsed the "Pass-Individual" level. Stating that the public needs to know that schools have standards and that decisions about them are made carefully, the participant's concern was that the public may believe that students with IEPs are graduating without any standards. Representatives from greater Minnesota believed that the criteria for "Pass-Individual" should be set early to maintain high expectations. They expressed concern that this particular option might be used as an "11th hour tool" in crisis situations.

Some participants suggested that the issue of levels is somewhat of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, lowering expectations to allow everyone to pass the Basic Standards Tests is a problem. On the other hand, if a student gets to the end of her or his high school career and has still not passed, that's also problematic.

III. Future District Needs

A. Tracking and Reporting Student Information

When asked what information they would like to obtain about student participation and performance on the Basic Standards Tests, both the greater Minnesota and metropolitan districts stated that it would be important to access information about the performance of students with disabilities on the Tests separate from students in general education. Most districts reported that they are interested in using this information to inform curriculum, make decisions, and conduct planning. A few districts in both greater Minnesota and the metropolitan area asserted that they are already able to obtain this information, but many others cannot.

Questions were raised about what information would be important to track.

Greater Minnesota representatives would like to be able to access statewide data on how students with disabilities are performing. Because their districts are so small and have so few students with disabilities, they would like to be able to compare themselves with other similar districts across the state.

Questions were raised about what information would be important to track. For example, one metropolitan representative asked whether it is important to know how many students have IEPs, what students' specific disabilities are, or what the level of their needs are. Another metropolitan participant felt it would be important to track exemptions by level or category of special education. When discussing how best to track this information, there was consensus that no one wanted new IEP forms. The possibility of including additional data fields on the exams was raised. One metropolitan district participant reported that in their district everything is "flagged" on their database, which allows staff to access and sort information according to specific needs.

B. Information About the Tests

Across the districts represented, participants emphasized the need for more information. They expressed the need for terms to be well-defined; several people commented that because "accommodations" and "modifications" in the classroom mean something quite different than what the state is proposing, clear definitions of terms are crucial. The groups also called for clear written guidelines regarding accommodations and modifications, as well as an articulation of the requirements for each of the three performance levels (i.e., Pass-State, Pass-Individual, Exempt). Such established guidelines were considered critical, because many teachers and school staff may still consider the Basic Standards Tests as the latest "bandwagon" or fad.

There was complete agreement that there was a need for training and support from the state, both for school personnel and parents.

C. Training

Of all the topics discussed in both the metropolitan and greater Minnesota meetings, the one area for which there was complete agreement was the need for training and support from the state, both for school personnel and parents. Both metropolitan and greater Minnesota representatives strongly expressed the need for *ongoing* consultation from the state, not just one-time training, regarding the implementation of the Basic Standards Tests. For example, one metropolitan district participant thought it would be helpful to have representatives from the Department of Children, Families and Learning meet with them before the next testing cycle to help them prepare for testing, and/or soon after testing to discuss the test administration process.

D. Other Identified Needs

The greater Minnesota representatives discussed the need for greater collaboration between regular and special education, stating that what works for special education also works for regular education–that students should not be divided into "our kids vs. your kids."

Test security was acknowledged by all participants to be an important component of Basic Standards testing. However, there appears to be a

pressing need to creatively consider ways to allow across-day testing for students who may need frequent breaks (e.g., students with ADHD, students who are medically fragile). Participants recognized that test security issues arise when testing extends beyond one day, but expressed the desire for more flexibility. One metropolitan district that has used graduation exams for several years gives individual schools a two-week window to complete testing. While the bulk of testing is generally completed in one day (within each school), building staff decide when in the two weeks they are going to test and retain some students (who may need more time or specific accommodations) for separate testing days.

Both greater Minnesota and metropolitan representatives raised the issue of accountability regarding curriculum. Participants believed that it is time for both special education and regular education to be accountable, and that the Basic Standards Tests provide a way to hold schools accountable for student achievement.

IV. District Concerns

A. General Concerns about Basic Standards Tests

Focus group participants identified several concerns about the use of the Basic Standards Tests for students with disabilities:

- Several greater Minnesota districts expressed concern that the focus in schools will be placed on the tests, and not on maintaining effective instructional practices and curricula for the purpose of improving student outcomes.

- Some greater Minnesota representatives questioned the validity and usefulness of the Basic Standards Tests over other tests currently used in the special education assessment process.

- Both metropolitan and greater Minnesota districts expressed concern that the Basic Standards Tests may lead to increased referral rates for special education.

- The issue was raised that the tests may move schools away from site-based management back to a "statewide curriculum."

Districts expressed concern that the Basic Standards Tests may lead to increased referral rates for special education.

- In the metropolitan districts, the potential for "over-accommodating" students was raised. Conversely, in the greater Minnesota districts, people expressed concern about not being able to make all the appropriate accommodations and modifications.

- One metropolitan representative reported that in the 1994-95 school year, IEP teams were given the power to spend school funds to provide services for students if they were deemed necessary by the team. She contended that externally monitoring the Basic Standards Tests (with regard to inclusion and exclusion decisions) seems to "go against" this policy.

- Another question raised was whether decisions regarding different passing levels can be made retroactively. For example, if a student took a test in the Spring at the "Pass-State" level and earned a 60, could the IEP team later conclude that that score was sufficient for the student to pass at the "Pass-Individual" level?

B. Basic Standards Test for Written Composition

There was considerable discussion of the writing tests in both meetings. There appeared to be general agreement across districts that an oral response for the writing test seems to be more of a modification than an accommodation. Both metropolitan and greater Minnesota districts also questioned the validity of the test if students were provided scribes.

C. Resources for Accommodations

The issue of resources for making accommodations and modifications was a major theme raised by both the greater Minnesota and metropolitan districts, although in different ways. In the metropolitan districts, participants feared they would not have sufficient resources to make accommodations and modifications for the numerous students with disabilities they serve, particularly if there will only be one day of testing. Several metro representatives inquired as to whether the state would provide funding for accommodations and modifications. In the greater Minnesota districts, however, there are so few students with disabilities that schools worry they may not have the resources to accommodate them.

D. Remediation

Over the course of their discussions, representatives from both the metropolitan districts and greater Minnesota raised several related concerns about remediation for students with disabilities:

- Several representatives from greater Minnesota expressed concern about the impact of Basic Standards testing on the educational programming of students with disabilities. The question was raised whether the focus of education would be placed on remedial efforts to pass the tests at the expense of other types of learning experiences. For example, one greater Minnesota representative described how students in her

district who need help in reading are taken out of an English class, put into a remedial reading class, and thus are never exposed to the literature covered in the regular English curriculum.

Families .. need to be able to make choices based on their own priorities for their children.

- There were additional concerns raised about who would be responsible for remedial instruction and what that would mean for students. For example, a participant from one greater Minnesota district reported that they don't have many options for remedial instruction; students are referred for special education if they are failing too many classes by the fifth grade.

- Questions were raised about how the "Pass-Individual" option will interact with remedial instruction. In other words, what will be the motivation to remediate if schools can modify tests and lower performance standards?

- Remediation raised the issue of collaboration between general and special educators. Several greater Minnesota districts discussed the fact that currently, collaboration is completely dependent upon the personalities of individual teachers. They anticipate challenges from some teachers in making modifications and accommodations for the tests. Some teachers resist using any modifications in their classrooms, let alone in testing situations.

- Related to remediation, one greater Minnesota representative expressed the belief that families need to be able to make choices based on their own priorities for their children. At present, families don't have much choice because the districts still don't know exactly how all students are performing on the state exams.

E. Use of Data

Although both groups expressed interest in gathering information about students in special education (see earlier discussion in Section III), there were serious concerns about how the information would be used and by whom. Participants agreed that issues of confidentiality may arise when pursuing how students with disabilities are performing. In both meetings, suggestions were made that guidelines be produced for the use of testing data.

F. Equity Issues

The issue of equitable testing conditions for low achieving students in regular education was raised in both meetings. One regular education teacher from greater Minnesota pointed out that the low achieving general education students in her Basic English class (who were put in the class to obtain extra help) will have to leave and take the test in the cafeteria with all the other students, because students in regular education can only request such an accommodation as seniors. Other students in her class having IEPs will be allowed to remain and take the test in her classroom. Other metropolitan district representatives expressed concern about the significant numbers of students in general education who read at lower levels than special education students having IEP goals in reading.

The issue of variability across schools and districts was raised.

G. Other Concerns

For both metropolitan and greater Minnesota district representatives, the issue of variability across schools and districts was raised. Representatives discussed the fact that what may be acceptable as a modification in one district or part of the state may not be acceptable in another. They felt that this is an important issue to consider if the state is moving towards a "universal diploma." Both groups felt variability was an issue not only across schools and districts but within schools; teachers have differing views about accommodations and their implications. This potential lack of consistency becomes especially problematic with highly mobile students.

Concerns were raised about the possibility of litigation, primarily by metropolitan district representatives. Their concerns focused on signing off any document that would or could prevent a student from receiving a diploma, and on parents or advocates making requests for accommodations or modifications that the schools might not be able to honor.

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